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Divine explosion

Is the scheduled Divine Strake explosion a precursor to more nuclear weapons testing?

By **Dennis Myers**

As a planned massive explosion in Southern Nevada draws closer, there is widespread suspicion that the explosion is being staged to simulate a nuclear test in an effort to get around a congressional ban on nuclear testing and a congressional cancellation of funding for a "bunker buster" earth penetration weapon.

<>Last week, the Pentagon and the Nevada Test Site were in conflict on whether the test would go off on the scheduled date of June 2. In Reno, attorney Robert Hager--representing clients trying to stop the explosion--told KRNK News that he had been promised that it had been postponed until June 23. In Washington, a spokesperson for the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) denied that the date been changed, while in Nevada a test site official said preparations for the blast would not be complete until June 23.

When plans for the explosion were first announced in March, a federal official named James Tegnalia made an impolitic comment that got wide attention. "I don't want to sound glib here," said Tegnalia, "but it is the first time in Nevada that you'll see a mushroom cloud over Las Vegas since we stopped testing nuclear weapons." (Mushroom clouds are not peculiar to nuclear explosions. They are produced by any explosion involving heat and convection.)



Back in the 1950s, when the public believed official assurances that the atom is our friend, atomic explosions in Nevada were a tourist attraction.

Photo Illustration by David Jayne

The image was a loaded one, and soon, U.S. diplomats were having to calm Russian officials about a resumption of nuclear tests, and defense officials had to assure Congress the Pentagon was not looking to breach the congressional ban ("Explosive comment," April 6).

But even with the mushroom cloud comment taken as a poor choice of words, the initial news coverage also raised questions about why such a massive explosion was needed if it was not related to nuclear weapons. Princeton University international affairs professor Frank von Hippel, a former national security official in the Clinton administration, told the Las Vegas Review Journal on March 31, "If this is really being done to simulate a conventional weapon, I don't understand why they aren't using 20 tons [of explosives] instead of 700 tons."

The Washington Post called it "a conventional alternative to a nuclear weapon"--the "bunker buster" that Congress will not allow the Bush administration to research or develop.

The explosion will be created by 700-tons of ammonium nitrate fuel oil. By one estimate, that is enough explosive material to make 280 Oklahoma City-style bombs. The blast will be almost 50 times larger than that produced by the largest conventional weapon the U.S. military possesses. "This is the largest single explosive we could imagine doing," Tegnaglia said.

On April 4, United Press International (a news service that is part of Sun Myung Moon's holdings) reported something, but it was unclear exactly what. The report said, "According to the Federation of American Scientists, a Washington, D.C.-based arms control group, the test to take place in the Nevada desert will detonate 700 tons of explosives, equivalent to about half the power of the lowest yield nuclear bomb in the U.S. inventory." Elsewhere in the story, the writer seemed to be saying that the Federation was claiming that the Strake test was a simulation for a nuclear test, but the report never actually said so.

That muddled things for a while but still helped focus the discussion on whether the explosion is a simulation of a nuclear test.

Then a fiscal year 2006 Bush administration budget document surfaced that said flatly that the explosion is intended to simulate nuclear weapons: "Conduct the Tunnel Target Defeat Advanced Concept and Technology Demonstration(s) (ACTD) Full-Scale tunnel defeat demonstration using high explosives to simulate a low yield nuclear weapon ground shock environment at Department of Energy's Nevada Test Site."

Meanwhile, grassroots anxiety was growing over the notion that the explosion will kick up radioactive dust and debris from the Nevada Test Site. On April 21, four members of the Winnemucca Indian Colony and two downwinders (people who lived in the cancerous paths of fallout from 1950s and '60s atomic tests in Nevada) filed suit to stop the explosion. Their attorney, Robert Hager, told KRNK, "I further have been informed today a new decision will be made next week, on Tuesday, and depending upon the decision, the blast would be rescheduled for sometime around June 23."

Ursula Powers Sindlinger of Native Unity took advantage of the moment to point out that the test was happening on land taken from Native Americans: "It must be stressed that the presence of the United States military on Western Shoshone land is uninvited."

Surprisingly, in view of the federal government's history of deception in Nevada nuclear matters, most members of the Nevada congressional delegation have been willing to accept federal assurances and have shown little interest in the issue.

U.S. Rep. Shelley Berkley has been the most aggressive. Six weeks ago, she told the House, "Anytime an administration official starts talking about mushroom clouds and Las Vegas, I want answers." This month, she wrote to Tegnaglia demanding a written assurance that the explosion was conducted solely for conventional weapons research.

She also asked Tegnalia to "include in your written response documentation that the purpose and rationale of the Divine Strake test arise solely within the framework of conventional, not nuclear, weapons development. Further, I ask that you provide assurances and documentation in writing that the Divine Strake test is not a 'dual use' experiment that could contribute to either a conventional weapons development program or a nuclear weapons development program."

Members of Congress Jim Gibbons and Jon Porter said they were notified of the explosion last year but have said little else. John Ensign has also mostly been silent on Strake.

Jack Carter, Ensign's presumed Democratic opponent, passed up the chance to fault Ensign for his silence. A spokesperson for Carter said in an e-mail response, "In this instance, Jack doesn't have a specific comment on Divine Strake. It is, obviously, very complex. Therefore, he is taking guidance from U.S. Senator Harry Reid, since he--as Senate minority leader--has better access to the latest scientific findings with regard to the now-postponed test."

Sen. Reid initially expressed some concern. Then, after meeting with Tegnalia, he put out an April 6 statement saying he was "satisfied that a controversial explosion at the Nevada Test Site will not threaten the health or safety of Nevadans."

U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah said he was not willing to take the word of federal officials for that. He and U. S. Rep. Jim Matheson sent their aides on a tour of the Nevada explosion site, then they both issued statements expressing continued skepticism.

"I don't want any testing to harm Utahns again," Hatch said, "and I'm still concerned about a bomb test so near to past nuclear test sites." At another point, he said, "The more I look at this, the more upset I become."

One state over

Utah congressional officials have been much more assertive on the issue of the Strake explosion than those in Nevada (a development that has been commented on in the Utah press), possibly because Utah residents suffered much more from the downwind effects of nuclear testing in Nevada and from the deceptive assurances of safety from federal officials.

Matheson had his worst suspicions confirmed when DTRA official Doug Bruder was interviewed on CNN about Strake and said, "There are some very hard targets out there, and right now it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to defeat with current conventional weapons. Therefore, there are some that would probably require nuclear weapons."

Matheson, whose father (a former Utah governor) was a downwinder who died of cancer, put out an angry statement: "Officials who say they are using this Divine Strake test in planning for new nuclear weapons seem to be ignoring congressional intent about no new nuclear weapons, and that concerns me."

Subsequently, Bruder made additional comments that made clear that Strake is a nuclear simulation: "It could be nuclear or advanced conventional. A charge of this size would be more related to a nuclear weapon."

That was on April 28. Eight days later, Tegnalia--Bruder's superior--wrote to Hatch to say, "It is not tied to the development of a new nuclear weapon. Divine Strake is in no way a precursor to resuming nuclear weapon testing."

Thus within an eight-day period, two federal officials made contradictory statements, fanning the suspicions of locals.

While Nevada congressmembers have been relatively passive about Strake, Governor Guinn's administration

has been more forceful. The state insisted that the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) produce proof that the blast will not violate state environmental laws and said it would not permit the test unless that information was forthcoming. State environmental official Leo Drozdoff informed DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which administers the test site, that it was "prohibited from allowing this test to proceed until authorization" from his agency.

Nevada demanded an array of data so they could judge the impact of the explosion on Nevada's air.

State natural resources director Allen Biaggi says, "To date, the DOE has yet to submit all of the required information for our air quality concerns."

Federal officials have been busy issuing soothing statements to try to quiet the concern and criticism, and last week, they said they would hold town-hall style meetings. "I don't want the people of Utah to take this personally," said DTRA's Irene Smith. "It would not be happening if it was a danger."